

The Illusion of Certainty

Understanding Reality and the Culture of Intelligence

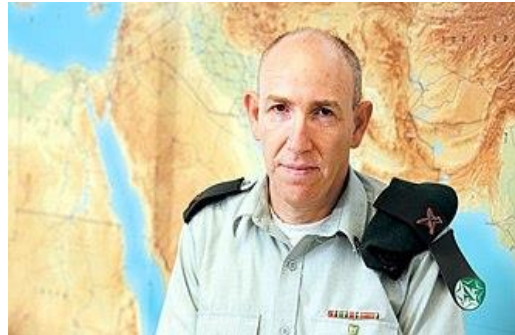
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"The main line of defense against surprises is understanding, not warning."

Yehoshafat Harkabi, 1988

Introduction

The surprise attack of October 7 exposed a deep gap that had developed in recent years between the political, military, and intelligence perceptions of Israel's decision-makers and actual reality. This gap played a central role in the IDF's inadequate preparedness on the morning of the attack. Since then, it has become clear that, as in other historical surprises, the Israeli intelligence community did in fact possess information that should have indicated not only the existence of this gap but also its magnitude. However, this information, along with additional warning signs that indicated the gap, failed to undermine the flawed perception framework of the decision-makers or prompt them to take more appropriate measures to prevent the attack.



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For the most part, the media and even the more professional circles have focused on the night before the surprise attack and the discussions held by officials in the IDF and Shin Bet during it. What really happened during that night will most probably be revealed only in the future, but it is already obvious that the events of that night are critical to the understanding of the overall Israeli failure and thus reflect a massive and tragic missed opportunity. It is highly probable that a more efficient performance during the night by those responsible would have led to a different outcome. However, this article does not focus on the events of the night of October 6, but on the gap that developed and deepened over the years between reality and the misconceptions of Israeli decision-makers. Unfortunately, this deep gap persisted even in the face of the information received during the night.

The persistence of this flawed perception framework over the years, up until the very onset of the attack, indicates, among other things, the high degree of certainty that decision-makers and intelligence officials attributed to it. The main argument of the article is that one of the contributing factors to this phenomenon is the "illusion of certainty" – a mindset that has taken hold in recent years, fostering the belief that reality is fully exposed, clear, and, most importantly, understood. The thesis of this article is that the illusion of certainty is not unique to the Gaza Strip arena but is rather a broader result of a problematic intelligence culture which fails to prioritize doubt and debate. This is further reinforced by with the belief that the accessibility provided by the information revolution established an "intelligence superiority" that rendered reality fully exposed and completely understood.



From intelligence superiority to the illusion of certainty

The surprise attack of October 7 occurred at a time when the IDF's Intelligence Corps (Aman) databases were filled with unprecedentedly high-quality and extensive information. Intelligence personnel frequently discussed the implications of the information revolution and the new opportunities it provided for intelligence work. The process of producing intelligence was described as a "factory" that created a massive flow of quality information directly supporting decision-making. In his recently published book, *Military Intelligence in a Complex and Changing Reality* (2024), Meir Finkel suggested that officers in Aman and in other parts of the IDF became convinced that high-quality information would solve the eternal military problem of making decisions in conditions of severe uncertainty.

Like Icarus from Greek mythology, who flew too close to the sun, Aman and the IDF seem to have attempted in recent years to get closer to certainty. The most pronounced attempt to overcome uncertainty was the ambitious concept of "intelligence superiority," which became a common term in both Aman and the IDF. In



The concept of "intelligence superiority" was of common use both in Aman and in the operational echelons of the IDF (IDF Spokesperson)

an article published by Aman officers in 2020 in the journal *Between the Poles*, intelligence superiority was described as a state in which "the enemy is exposed to us at any given moment and over time," their moves "are read in real time," and their "dilemmas and considerations are clear." Just as

the sun's heat melted the wax that held Icarus' wings, causing him to fall to his death, the surprise attack of October 7 shattered the illusion of certainty, revealing its devastating consequences for Aman and the IDF.

What was the source of the illusion that intelligence superiority could make the enemy fully exposed and overcome uncertainty? Apparently, it was the combination of two deeply entrenched trends which existed in Aman (and in the entire intelligence community) and a greater connection between them in recent years. The rehabilitation of Aman therefore also includes abandoning the concept of intelligence superiority in its extreme form, and especially the illusion of certainty. The basic assumption should be that the enemy's real situation will never be fully exposed, clear or entirely understood. In other words, there will always be a gap between our understanding of reality and what actually exists.



"Deep familiarity" is not enough



In his book "Intelligence as a national Institute", Yehoshafat Harkabi explains that such deep familiarity allows one to "penetrate the enemy's mind".

One trend came from an intelligence approach which favors a thorough and deep familiarity with the enemy's culture, language and history. In *Intelligence as a State Institution – The Lost Book* (2015), Yehoshafat Harkabi explains that such deep familiarity allows one to "penetrate the enemy's mind," meaning "into their thoughts, attitude, mindset and reactions," making it possible to know what the enemy is thinking better than the enemy does himself. He also explains its logic and purpose. "By studying the present, we can attempt to anticipate the future," Harkabi explained in a later article, expressing an approach that equates the role of intelligence with predicting the future.

In fact, deep familiarity with the enemy is of immense importance and is primary to the intelligence effort; its importance cannot be overstated. To a large extent, it is the foundation of all intelligence work. However, such an approach is also seriously problematic because it assumes that reality has

rules (or patterns) which intelligence can decipher, and once deciphered, intelligence can predict the future. This is what Harkabi meant when he wrote, "A good memory is the first condition for being a prophet," even though he himself was aware of the problem and elsewhere warned against depicting intelligence as a "prophecy institution."

The main problem with this approach is that the dynamic reality of national security, with its multitude of actors and interests, has no fixed rules. Therefore, the basic assumption that future patterns of behavior can be predicted based on past actions is incorrect and misses the dynamism of human life. Leaders and other actors do not act according to rules or patterns that can be "deciphered." They make decisions in light of changing situations and often surprise observers by deviating from their previous patterns of behavior when their perceptions change.

Intelligence personnel holding this view are aware that the enemy's behavior may change, but they believe that their familiarity with their subjects will allow them to identify a change when it occurs. However, experience teaches that we are often surprised even by the people closest to us, those to whom we have ample access and with whom there are no language or cultural barriers. It happens despite our familiarity with them and how they have behaved over the years.

There is no doubt that the Israeli intelligence community had a deep, abiding problem in understanding how Hamas translated its vision into a concrete offensive plan, the military buildup to implement the plan and the decision to attack. Yet, some of those involved in the failure had a very thorough familiarity with Hamas, acquired over many years. This failure also extended to civilian experts who had studied Hamas. Even the few who questioned the concept of "a deterred Hamas committed to an arrangement" failed to imagine or warn about the surprise attack of October 7.

The conclusion is that while familiarity with the enemy is immensely important, it cannot be the sole factor for understanding the enemy. It must be expressed within a skeptical and critical framework that recognizes the possibility of a potential gap in understanding.

Even high-quality information will not lead to transparency

The other trend stemmed from the belief that high-quality information was primary for understanding reality. In his book *Neila* (1991), Yoel Ben Porat describes information as "the *raison d'être* of intelligence." That approach assumes that the main reason for uncertainty is information gaps, and therefore the purpose of intelligence is to obtain information that can fill the gaps to resolve uncertainty. The trend strengthened after the Yom Kippur War, leading to the investment of substantial resources and undertaking high-risk operations to get as close as possible to the enemy's decision-

makers in order to acquire information that could serve as a definitive warning of war ("smoking gun" or "golden piece of intelligence").

Information is of immense importance and forms the foundation of all intelligence work. It is what distinguishes intelligence from other disciplines concerned with understanding reality. However, the surprise attack of October 7 reminded us once again that important matters do not always appear in information, or when they do, they are difficult to identify without the correct conceptual framework. Information supports several possibilities but without proposing additional possibilities and critically examining them, the information itself is of limited value. The information that was received and the hope for a "golden piece of intelligence" proved disappointing in this case, as in many others. Harkabi also warned against the tendency to exaggerate the importance of information.

The illusion of certainty is thus almost a natural result of the connection formed between experts and the flow of high-quality information, which theoretically reinforced their expertise and eliminated all doubt and ambiguity. This was likely influenced by a new approach which began to filter into the Intelligence Corps in the 1990s. The approach has some advantages but also notable drawbacks. Apparently, it provided a convenient framework for both the development of the illusion of certainty and for the shift in intelligence's role and position at the decision-makers' table. "Enabling intelligence" has become more "committed" to Israel's political and military strategy and more "mobilized" to influence efforts aimed at shaping reality, often bypassing the effort to understand it.



IDF soldiers as viewed through Hamas binoculars



Logos of the Israeli Intelligence Community three organs – Mossad, ISA (Shabak) and Aman (INSS)

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The key is the culture of intelligence

How do we move forward? Roberta Wohl Stetter, in her 1962 book on Pearl Harbor, said we had to accept uncertainty as a fact and learn to live with it. Part of the challenge involves defining the purpose of the intelligence project. Joseph Nye, in a 1994 article in *Foreign Affairs*, said that the point was not to predict the future but to help decision-makers think about it. As Nye explained, no one can predict the future, and it would be a mistake to pretend otherwise.

The real lesson of October 7, therefore, deeply underscores the partial, fragile, temporary, complex nature of intelligence knowledge, as well as its dependence on multiple factors. Even the highest quality information and the most brilliant analysis cannot eliminate the uncertainty inherent in reality. This applies both to identifying attack targets and assessing the enemy's capabilities and intentions. It is a lesson that intelligence personnel and decision-makers must learn, understand, and internalize.



L.G. Prof. Yitzhak Ben-Israel
(Wikipedia)

Yitzhak Ben-Israel, writing in 1989 and 1999, proposed an alternative approach to intelligence analysis which could serve as a framework for a more sober understanding of both the present and the future. He said intelligence should operate similarly to science by encouraging daring hypotheses, then freely criticizing and testing them to identify those which withstand the criticism.

Ben-Israel refers to the method, but more than that, to an intelligence culture centered on doubt, uncertainty and debate. Voltaire said, "Uncertainty is an uncomfortable position. But certainty is an absurd one." In its positive sense, intelligence skepticism does not reflect despair from lack of knowledge or lead to paralysis. On the contrary, skepticism is a powerful tool for fostering learning and developing knowledge. Its practical expression is in a critical, skeptical, systematic approach that questions the validity of the information developed or received by researchers, the possibility or explanation they have adopted, and the reliability of the information at their disposal.

Debate makes it possible for different approaches to confront one another and helps expose weak points in the effort to clarify reality. It can help intelligence personnel reveal the many biases that hinder their ability to accurately observe and describe reality.

In this sense, the idea behind the "Devil's Advocate" Department (and additional mechanisms related to lessons learned from the surprise of the Yom Kippur War, such as "pluralism" or the "personal duty to warn") is fundamentally correct, but its

implementation can only occur within a broader culture that treats doubt and debate as primary tools in the intelligence process. Oversight and other mechanisms have no real value if the entire intelligence organization is not structured to undertake a serious examination of contradictory opinions. Such an approach is needed not only as a safeguard ("sanity check") for leading assessments but out of a belief in the possibility of gaps in understanding.

The main practical tool for focusing the effort to obtain clarity and understanding around doubt and debate is the idea of "competing hypotheses." Implementing the concept shapes a systematic intelligence process which provides a foundation for debate by presenting a wide range of explanations for the present and possibilities for the future. The realization of the concept helps enhance transparency in the assessment process, adopting a clear standard which allows broad judgment and the critique of fundamental assumptions and the entire analysis process. It is not merely a way to test a leading assessment, it is a profound idea which requires grappling with additional possibilities in every critical issue, even those not necessarily reflected in the information.

Without "competing hypotheses," contradictory information loses significance because it becomes difficult to understand. For example, Hamas' non-participation during rounds of fighting in which the Palestinian Islamic Jihad was attacked in Gaza (2019, 2022 and 2023) was interpreted as reinforcing the assumption that Hamas had been deterred. A competing possibility that Hamas was building its power for a future attack might have provided a better understanding.



Experience teaches that an approach centered on doubt and debate is often in opposition to human nature, and in contrast to intelligence approaches which

emphasize the need for shared understandings and agreements among researchers and between them and policymakers, and operational personnel. It is often argued that it is also opposed to the hierarchical nature of organizations within the intelligence community. Therefore, it must be "imposed" on the analysts through mechanisms that make doubt and debate an integral part of the intelligence process, which is the responsibility of commanders and directors at all levels.

Conclusion

Exactly fifty years after the surprise of the Yom Kippur War, the surprise attack of October 7 2023 made it clear to the current generation of intelligence personnel and decision-makers that the knowledge at their disposal was, at best, a fragile system of hypotheses – one that must be continuously and rigorously tested. Even the highest-quality information cannot resolve the uncertainty of reality, which should also guide efforts to understand the enemy and the environment. The array of both familiar and new issues identified in this article underscores the need for a fundamental shift in the intelligence analysis methodology, and especially in the culture within which it is applied.

Therefore, the path to rehabilitating Aman involves parting with the concept of "intelligence superiority" and adopting a culture that not only acknowledges the possibility of a gap in understanding but also systematically works to identify "signals" that may indicate the existence and magnitude of the gap, including those related to the most deeply held beliefs. Such a culture is built on foundations of doubt and debate and embraces ambiguity as a natural element in a world where uncertainty reigns. This is likely the culture the Agranat Commission sought to instill by strengthening pluralism, but the lesson is that culture does not change solely through structural modifications. It is the direct responsibility of the leaders of intelligence organizations.